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IDEALISM IN GREEK ART

By PROFESSOR PERCY GARDNER

IN a previous paper I dwelt on the suddenness and the brilliancy with which the light of Greek civilization shone out, illuminating the ancient world and serving as a beacon to each generation since the Renaissance. At present I propose to treat more especially of the debt which the world owes to Greek art, that is: the arts of painting and sculpture, for it is in them that Greece has been most influential. Greek architecture was marvelous in its perfection; but like all architecture it depended too closely upon natural surroundings and conditions to be easily transplanted to other countries. Music was regarded by the great Greek thinkers almost entirely from the ethical point of view, as a training of the emotions; and it has irrecoverably perished. But the possibilities of painting and especially of sculpture were first discovered by the Greeks; and enough of sculptural triumphs have come down to us to enable us to understand this particular development as well as we understand Homer and Plato.

But there is a great difference between the appreciation of literature and the appreciation of art. One can hold converse with Homer and Plato sitting in one's study, and enjoy their works even in an English dress; but to really enjoy the masterpieces of sculpture requires time and travel and a power to think oneself into different mental and moral surroundings. Many men talk of Greek Art; but few have seriously considered it. One finds highly cultivated men who take their notions in regard to it from Lessing and Goethe and even Byron; although a century ago not a tithe of the great works of Greek sculpture which we now possess were accessible even to travellers, and, in the absence of photography, it was impossible save by travel to gain access even to what was then in the museums. The goal of the student of Greek art was not Athens nor the British Museum, but the Roman galleries; and few were alive to the fact that most of the statues there preserved had been so transformed by Italian restorers that they gave quite false impressions.

In speaking of the general character of works of Greek Art one has to use terms which have been the stock in trade of art critics since the days of Aristotle, but which have seldom been used with precision—such terms as naturalism, idealism, impressionism. There is nothing that should tend more directly to clearing one's use of these terms than a consideration of so simple yet so grand a phenomenon as Greek sculpture. For this is a phenomenon which we can trace with exactness from the cradle to the grave, one which grows with the regularity and symmetry of a tree, with scarcely any abnormal developments or false starts, with no interference from foreign influence. Without numerous illustrations it is impossible satisfactorily to sketch its history and character, but the attempt must be made.

MEMORY AND IMAGINATION IN EARLY GREEK ART

It has been shown by recent critics, especially Lange and Lowry, that Greek sculpture does not start, as one might have expected, with an attempt

directly to imitate men and animals; but that it is from the very first a construction in which a great place is taken by memory and imagination. If pencil and paper are given to a clever child and he is bidden to make drawings, he does not set about copying the furniture in the room, but he makes rough outlines of men and women, trees and houses, often of fairies and dragons—Imagination sways him as well as observation; and he will often put together in impossible combinations things he remembers, and will represent everything in the particular aspect in which it has impressed him.

Perspective he will despise; every figure will be drawn for its own sake, and each must have all the features he remembers; men in profile must have two visible arms and two eyes; a pond will appear as round, though only from an aeroplane will it have that outline; a flower will be represented as it appears when one looks down on it or smells it, a bud always in profile. When one considers, at the opposite end of the artistic scale, that Turner in his paintings often introduced into one natural scene features taken from his memory of another, one feels how elemental and universal in art is this subjective element, how determinedly man refuses to be made a bond-slave of that which actually exists, how feeling revolts against the mere testimony of the senses!

When Greece began to represent men in sculpture, Egypt had already attained considerable technical skill in such depiction. But the Greek would not go to the Egyptian school; it was his own ideas and impressions, not those of foreigners, that he intended to throw into visible form. So when sculpture began, he took a tree-trunk or a squared stone and cut in it rude indications of head, arms and legs. He roughly hewed the stone from the front into the outline of a man facing, then he turned the stone on its side and hewed it into the form of a man passing by him.

LONGING FOR A FLIGHT ABOVE NATURE.

Many barbarous peoples have acted in this fashion, but Greek sculpture became rapidly progressive because the Greek had in him a natural faculty and taste for art. He could see that the figure he had produced was not really like a human being, so he amended it in the direction of naturalism. And he had within him a love of human beauty and strength and symmetry which made him discontented with mere naturalism. He wanted, as Aristotle puts it, not merely to make something like a man, but to make something superior to the ordinary man. And as, to his thinking, the gods had human forms, but forms more beautiful than human, the natural idealism of the race took to representing the gods, each sculptor vying with his teacher or predecessor to transcend ordinary form and beauty and to make something not unsuited to divine attributes. The Egyptians had produced images of the gods; but these were not more beautiful than the images of men, only distinguished from them by some symbolic addition, wings or an animal head, or it might be a head-dress or a sceptre. The Hindoos produced images

of the gods, but they were not more beautiful than human beings, but uglier, often even monstrous.

The Greeks produced figures of the gods human, and yet above the human, a Hercules stronger than any athlete, a Hermes swifter than any runner, a Zeus more dignified than any king or magistrate. The ideal character of Greek sculpture was largely due to this religious element in it, to its habit of depicting the gods. But it persisted in the representation of men and women. It has been shown by Brucke that the height of its ideality was in part due to a certain accumulation of beauty. When sculptors found in a man or woman some specially beautiful feature, the formation of a flank, the curve of a breast, the poise of a head, they could not wholly relinquish it even in statues of individuals. The beauty of Elpiniké or Alkibiades bequeathed a certain touch of charm to even the portraits of their contemporaries. All the marshals of Alexander the Great had in art something of that monarch's haughty air and passionate eyes.

Perhaps physiologists and anatomists may complain of this way of working as tending to produce images not of men but of monsters. Every human body, they will say, is of a piece, and an inner harmony runs through it. You could not combine the head of an athlete with the hand of a scholar, nor the full breast of a Juno with the martial air of an Athena. And of course there is truth in the objection. To put together the best points of a number of men in an ideal figure would be to run a great risk of absurdity. To avoid the danger of the process, a great deal of natural taste and good sense would be necessary. Still, nature never wholly attains the ideal. She makes mistakes and failures; and a skilled artist may avoid the imperfections of a model as a breeder of stock will by judicious crossings eliminate a defect in a breed of cattle. An artist may be on such friendly terms with nature that he may dare to try to express her tendencies more completely than she can herself express them. By serving nature he may improve her as our engineers by serving nature learn to use her powers for a human purpose.

KNOWLEDGE MAKES US FASTIDIOUS

It is however probable that the far more minute and exact knowledge of nature which modern scientists have acquired may make us more fastidious to preserve the necessary relations of nature than seemed essential to the Greeks. For example: a Centaur, man to the waist joined on a horse's neck, is an essentially inconsistent form, as even Lucretius pointed out. To a modern eye running along the backbone which is joined in the middle at an acute angle, the creature seems inconsistent and offensive. The Greeks very seldom adopted the monsters common in oriental art, but their love of men and horses found a field in attempts to combine the charms of both forms, and they managed even at the zenith of their art to tolerate the Centaur as well as the Griffin, and to represent winged Genii.

Of course in the earlier productions of Greek art there is a certain amount of convention. Unsophisticated man is very conservative and optimistic to a certain measure of success; in representing natural objects he is apt to pause and repeat that

success. So in archaic works we find certain little invasions of naturalism into a conventional representation. In a merely typical representation of a human face the nose may be evidently taken from an individual; or, while the face and body are still conventional, the hands and feet, as in the bronze statue of a charioteer from Delphi, may be closely copied from life. But from the end of the sixth century onwards the whole history of sculpture lies in the respective shares in it taken by naturalism and idealism.

The Greek had keen senses and a great love of novelty, so his sculptural productions grow with time ever freer and more life-like. He learns the form of the muscles in action and repose; he studies the rhythm of movements. In Myron's Diskobolos, a work of the middle of the fifth century, we find an almost unsurpassed study of the body of an athlete in an instantaneous position of strain, though even here some convention persists in the expressionless face and the want of smoothness in transition from some parts of the body to other parts. At a later time, about B. C. 300, a great change came over sculpture as a result of the anatomical studies of the physicians of Alexandria; and the body of a man is represented, not merely as the artist sees it, but as the anatomist knows it to be. Whether this access of knowledge really worked for the good of art may be doubted; but some of the works of late Greek art, such as the Borghesé fighter in the Louvre, or the torso which Michelangelo called his instructor, carry life-likeness to a wonderful extreme. At the same period the portraits of statesmen and philosophers rise to a marvelous height of perfection; so that with many of the great men of Greece we seem to have a more exact intimacy than we have with our own ancestors of two centuries ago, who hid their individuality under conventional wigs and cravats, or even the men of our own day, who by shaving away the natural growth of hair on cheek and chin deprive a man's face of a great part of its natural character.

GROWTH OF IDEALISM IN GREECE

Side by side with the growth of naturalism in Greek sculpture we have a growth of idealism, sometimes combining and sometimes clashing with it. But whereas naturalism grows steadily and has no sets-back, idealism is a more spasmodic process, depends more on social and political conditions and on the influence of great and inspired artists. Nature as a teacher is always the same; but men's reading of nature and the re-arrangement of what she gives in accordance with human desire and aspiration is a constantly varying element. Human feelings, awe of the gods, love of beauty, desire for perfection, were always molding natural forms into something belonging not wholly to the conditions of time and space, but to that world of archetypal forms of which Plato speaks, and which we call the ideal world.

The Greeks themselves thought that ideality in their art reached its highest point in the age of Perikles and Polykleitos. In that age such creations as the Zeus of Olympia and the Hera of Argos combined the perfection of human beauty and charm with a more than human majesty, so that

they made all who approached them in worship feel the sublimity of the divine nature and the smallness of earthly affairs. In the fourth century there existed a more complete knowledge of the attitude and grouping; but religion was declining, social decay had set in, and the artists had lost their inspiration. They had better *materials* for building a temple of art; but the architects' ambition to build nobly had failed.

There is a certain measure of naturalism in the art of all ages. In ages of close observation of nature and of scientific discovery it naturally attracts most people. Yet it is an eternal truth that the art which attempts to copy nature and not to transcend it can never be a great art. In copying nature every artist must necessarily lose much; unless he can add from the store of ideas something to enhance the value of his copy, he must in the long run prove unsuccessful. What interests man is man himself, life and the emotions of life; and unless there be underlying emotion, the cleverest transcript of nature must remain essentially uninteresting.

GREEK IDEALISM IS COLLECTIVE

But wherein Greek idealism most widely differs from the idealism of modern artists is, that in Greece the ideas were always collective, furnished by a city or a school, whereas in modern times the ideas are individual. The modern artist tries to look at the world in a way of his own and to interpret it according to his individual bent. He acquires a personal style, so that any critic looking at a work of his will recognize the author. The Greeks sought for beauty and emotion, not individually but in groups; so that a student of Greek art on seeing a statue will be far readier to determine its date and school than its actual author.

Of course the same holds to a considerable degree in regard to the artists of the Renaissance, and even such groups as the Pre-Raphaelites: but the disease of excessive individualism and the search after mere novelty have gained upon us terribly in recent times.

Perhaps I should say a word as to the third great tendency in art, which is commonly called impressionism. How far did this sway the art of Greece? I think very little. Greek art was essentially statuesque and the slow and painstaking procedure of sculpture does not give much opening for impressionism. The Greek loved finish; he loved rhythm and balance. Many of the effects striven after by artists of the school of Rodin he would have regarded as beyond the province of sculpture.

But when one writes of Greek Art one must not try to conceal its limitations. Practically it only dealt successfully with the human form and with animals like the horse and the dog which have been largely humanized. If from Greek productions one eliminated men and women and gods, the rest would be poor, at a far lower level than the art of Japan, for example. We must not expect to find in them sympathetic or even careful renderings of natural scenes. Nor must one expect any presentations of extreme passion; everything is moderated and limited. Nor must one expect mysticism or untrammelled imagination. It is humanism, and humanism of the senses and intellect and the simpler emotions, which furnishes the key to the triumphs of Greek art, as to the eternal charm of Greek literature.

We need not and can not limit ourselves by the too narrow boundaries of Greek art, but we are obliged to allow that, within the limits it chose to acknowledge, it was one of the most perfect and admirable of human products.

Percy Gardner

IN URBE

Skyscrapers at Sunset

Above the roof and chimney height
Transformed by the sunset air
I see dream castles all alight,
Jewelled with tints surpassing fair:

The windowed walls uplifted high,
Howe'er their bulky quoins obtrude,
Make pageantry against the sky
As mysteries of evening brood.

All the famed past in brave review
With glowing turret, bastion, keep—
Segovia, serrate in the blue,
Or Carcassonne, still half asleep:

Granada's pride of palaced crest
Where, lo, the Alhambra's towers loom
Blank to the sun, which seeks in zest
The inner marvels of its gloom;

Ægina's pediments forlorn;
Athena's outlook o'er the sea;
The Parthenon, whose columns scorn
Both Time and man's hostility;

Tivoli and its rock-based dome;
Assisi's flying silhouettes
And all the ramps of wall-girt Rome
Circled with sunburnt parapets;

The essence of all memoried night
In terraced splendors, stone on stone,
Find magic semblance in this light,
Radiant as if Aladdin's throne!

Harvey W. Watts